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Welcome to Natural Health Review Issue 29.

Each issue of Natural Health Research Review highlights a selection of recently published studies that I hope will be of interest to natural health practitioners. In addition to providing 3 key facts of the study, I add a comment about why the study might be of interest and how it can potentially affect current practice in the field of natural health.

In this issue, we learn that zinc can reduce the duration of common cold symptoms by around a day. This may not seem much but, given that almost half of time taken off work is for the common cold, it's an important finding. We also see that exercise and probiotics can reduce irritable bowel symptoms. And for men living with prostate cancer, the results of a study out of Harvard suggest that regular moderate exercise improves your chance of surviving the cancer.

We hope you enjoy the latest issue of Natural Health Research Review, and welcome your feedback.

Kind Regards,

Prof Shaun Holt
shaun@naturalhealthreview.org

Zinc may be good for the common cold

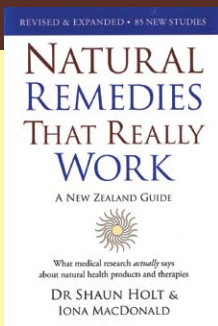
The facts:

- A review of 15 trials involving 1360 people assessed the effects of zinc lozenges or syrup on common cold symptoms and duration.
- When taken within a day of the onset of cold symptoms in otherwise healthy people, zinc reduced the severity and length of illness.
- Children who took zinc for 5 months or longer caught fewer colds, took less time off school, and needed fewer antibiotics than children who didn't take zinc.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Almost half of time taken off work is for the common cold and so, as zinc appears to reduce the duration of symptoms by around a day, this is an important finding. The research found that you can get this benefit if you start taking the zinc soon after symptoms start. Alternatively, if you take it every day, the research found that you will suffer around 40% fewer colds. Zinc can be taken as a syrup, tablets or lozenges. The common cold is the most widespread illness in the world and the average New Zealand adult will have around 3 episodes a year, and children tend to have more.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD001364.pub3>



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Alexander technique is cost-effective for back pain

The facts:

- 579 patients with chronic or recurrent low back pain were enrolled in a study to evaluate the cost-effectiveness and usefulness of the Alexander technique (therapeutic massage, exercise, and lessons) for persistent back pain.
- Intervention costs ranged from £30 for an exercise prescription to £596 for 24 lessons in Alexander technique plus exercise.
- A combination of six lessons in Alexander technique plus exercise was the most useful and cost-effective option for persistent back pain.

Prof Shaun Holt:

The Alexander technique has been defined as an education and guidance system to "improve posture and movement, and to use muscles efficiently". Previous studies have suggested that it is effective for back pain, which is both common and very hard to treat. This large study, which had nearly 600 participants found that the Alexander technique was more effective than exercise and that a combination of six lessons in Alexander technique lessons followed by exercise was the most effective and cost effective option.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a2656>

Green bananas help diarrhoea

The facts:

- This community-based trial in rural Bangladesh evaluated the effects of a green banana-supplemented diet in 2968 children with acute or prolonged diarrhoea.
- For the treatment group, mothers were instructed to add cooked green banana to their child's diet; the others were fed as normal.
- The recovery rates of children with diarrhoea were much faster in those given green bananas than in those given a standard diet.



Prof Shaun Holt:

Natural remedies are often seen as a lifestyle choice in rich, Western countries, but in the developing world, cheap and effective natural products can have enormous, even life-saving, benefits. By way of example, diarrhoea results in 1.5 million deaths among children under the age of five each year, the second most common cause of infant death. This trial of nearly 3,000 young children in Bangladesh found that adding cooked green banana to the diets of children with diarrhoea significantly hastened recovery.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-3156.2010.02608.x>

Exercise may improve irritable bowel symptoms

The facts:

- 102 adults with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) were split into 2 groups and were instructed to either maintain their normal lifestyle or to get more exercise (up to 1 hour of moderate-to-vigorous exercise for at least 3 days a week) for 3 months.
- Symptoms that were assessed included cramps, bloating, constipation and diarrhoea.
- At the end of the study, the exercise group reported greater improvements in symptoms than the group that carried on as normal, and were less likely to show worsening symptoms.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Irritable bowel syndrome is a common illness that is poorly understood by doctors and consequently very difficult to treat. Could simple exercise be the answer? This smallish trial suggests it may be, with nearly half of those that did the exercise experiencing clinically important reductions in symptoms. The recommended exercise schedule was 20 to 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous exercise - like brisk walking or biking - on three to five days out of the week.

<http://www.nature.com/ajg/journal/vaop/ncurrent/full/ajg2010480a.html>



Independent commentary by
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Probiotics reduce abdominal pain in children

The facts:

- 141 children with IBS or abdominal pain received oral *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG (LGG) or placebo twice daily for 8 weeks to assess the effects of the probiotic on symptoms.
- Compared with placebo, LGG significantly reduced the frequency and severity of abdominal pain, even during the 2-month period after treatment was stopped.
- Use of LGG probiotics significantly improved gut permeability in the children with IBS.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Recurrent abdominal pain, which may or may not be diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome, is a common complaint in children and is one of the most common reasons for referral to a specialist. As probiotics seem to be beneficial in a number of gastrointestinal disorders, it is perhaps no surprise that this small study found that probiotics reduced the frequency and severity of abdominal pain in children. The study had a number of limitations, but given the safety of probiotics supplements, a “try and see” approach can be recommended to parents of children with these symptoms.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/126/6/e1445>

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Cannabis ingredient restores taste in cancer patients

The facts:

- 21 adult cancer patients with taste alterations and poor appetite after chemotherapy were given either THC (the active ingredient of cannabis) or placebo twice daily for 18 days.
- Compared with patients who took placebo, those who took THC reported improved and enhanced taste perception, and an improved appetite.
- The THC group also reported increased quality of sleep, relaxation, and improved quality of life.

Prof Shaun Holt:

People with cancer face many challenges and a common one is not having a good appetite, due to the illness or the treatments. This can lead to malnutrition, which can make the person feel more sick, further reducing appetite. It can be hard to break this vicious cycle and people with cancer often use cannabis to stimulate their appetite. This study found that tetrahydrocannabinol, one of the main active ingredients in cannabis, can also actually make food taste and smell better, and thereby help to bring back a bigger appetite.

<http://annonc.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/02/11/annonc.mdq727.abstract>

Physical activity helps outcome after prostate cancer

The facts:

- 2705 men with prostate cancer were followed for nearly 20 years to determine the effects of exercise on their survival.
- Men who engaged in at least 3 hours of exercise (e.g. swimming, biking, jogging, tennis) per week had a much lower risk of dying from prostate cancer than those who exercised for <1 hour per week.
- Men who walked for at least 90 minutes a week at a normal to brisk pace were much less likely to die from any cause than those who walked <90 minutes per week at an easy pace.



Prof Shaun Holt:

We usually think of exercise as something that healthy people do, but this larger study showed that ill people can benefit as well. Men with prostate cancer who did 3 hours or more of physical activity a week had a 61% lower risk of dying from prostate cancer, when compared to those who did less than 1 hour of physical activity a week. The Harvard University researchers said...“Our results suggest that men can reduce their risk of prostate cancer progression after a diagnosis of prostate cancer by adding physical activity to their daily routine. This is good news for men living with prostate cancer who wonder what lifestyle practices to follow to improve cancer survival”.

<http://jco.ascopubs.org/content/early/2011/01/04/JCO.2010.31.5226.abstract>

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Selenium reduces PSA levels in men

The facts:

- 30 healthy middle-aged US men took a selenium supplement for 6 weeks to assess the effects of the mineral on prostate cancer risk.
- Selenium supplementation led to a decrease in plasma levels of prostate-specific antigen (PSA), an indicator of prostate cancer.
- Reducing a marker of prostate cancer does not necessarily mean a reduction in cancer risk, but does justify further study of selenium glycinate supplementation.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Sometimes, new research does not help us to understand a problem but can actually confuse the issue. It is generally agreed amongst researchers that selenium supplements do not reduce the chances of getting prostate cancer, or surviving it if you do get it. But that is not what this study found! The research found that selenium glycinate supplementation gave changes consistent with improved selenium functional status and lowered prostate cancer risk in a group of 30 middle-aged US men. So what can be recommended based on these conflicting findings? At this stage we can say that selenium supplements are safe as long as the dose is not excessive and MAY be of benefit.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nutres.2010.10.012>

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Vegan diet requires omega-3 and B12 boost

The facts:

- A review of 30 years' research evaluated the cardiovascular risk associated with vegetarian and vegan diets.
- Because strict vegetarians and vegans are likely to be low in iron, zinc, vitamin B12 and omega-3, they may be at increased risk for heart attack or stroke.
- People following a vegetarian lifestyle (particularly vegans) may therefore require additional omega-3 and vitamin B12 supplements.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Although there are many health benefits from a vegetarian or vegan diet, one of the risks is that the lack of meat or animal product often means that these diets can lead to a lack several key nutrients, including iron, zinc, vitamin B12, and omega-3. The study authors concluded that "...it is suggested that vegetarians, especially vegans, should increase their dietary omega-3 PUFA and vitamin B12 intakes", and my recommendation would be to take a fish oil supplement and a multivitamin tablet each day.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1021/jf103846u>

Passion flower tea improves sleep quality

The facts:

- 41 healthy volunteers were given a cup of either passion flower or parsley tea daily for 1 week, during which time they also completed a sleep diary.
- A daily cup of passion flower tea significantly improved sleep quality compared with parsley tea.
- Based on these findings, further studies of passion flower are warranted, particularly in patients with insomnia.



Prof Shaun Holt:

Sleep is a huge problem - up to 1 in 3 people do not get enough sleep, and in some countries, up to 1 in 10 people regularly take a sleeping tablet. This study found that tea made from a teabag containing 2 grams of dried passion flower significantly improved sleep quality. This is therefore a potentially pleasant, safe and effective way to help with this common problem.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21294203>

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